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# Beyond a Helpline

**A pilot project to provide effective HR support for smaller agencies**

**Final Evaluation Report  
Executive Summary**

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## Introduction

This is the summary of the final evaluation report for Beyond a Helpline, a two-year intensive pilot project to develop the Human Resources (HR) capacity of small homelessness agencies in London. 13 agencies participated overall and the project ran from 1 April 2006 to 31 March 2008.

Beyond a Helpline was initiated and substantially funded by the London Housing Foundation (LHF), delivered by the HR department of Broadway (a major homelessness charity) and evaluated by Triangle Consulting. It was an innovative project and intended to demonstrate both what could be achieved and to be replicable, so considerable emphasis was placed on evaluation throughout.

## Main activities

The key activities delivered by Broadway throughout the project were:

- The provision of draft policies and written procedures
- Five training courses covering recruitment, performance and managing difficult people
- An in-depth agency audit
- Regular surgery time (a half-day per quarter)
- An allocation of helpline hours each year.

These activities were clearly discrete from each other in Year 1, but in Year 2 there was considerably more flexibility in how they were used and a number of alternative approaches were offered.

## Key evaluation conclusions of the project

Beyond a Helpline was an innovative and successful approach to improving the HR function of small homelessness charities. It had the potential to completely transform the way small homelessness organisations were organised and the way they approached a range of HR functions. And often it did just that. The combination of services offered by Broadway was appropriate and effective and the quality of experience and expertise of the individuals delivering the work was exceptionally high.

The majority of the agencies who signed up were highly motivated: they had already recognised HR issues holding them back, helped design the project and invested what many considered to be a significant amount of money (compared to no budget line for HR). This was an essential prerequisite for the success of Beyond a Helpline. It did not appear to be attractive to small homelessness agencies unless they had a reasonably high awareness of need for effective people management.

Despite this, there was an initial shock for most agencies when they realised the time requirements and the sheer volume and length of written policies and procedures involved. A couple never made it past this initial hurdle to engage fully, others went through a pain barrier and their first face-to-face contact or training with Broadway then convinced them of the potential and importance of dedicating time and resources. Some were more pushed than pulled, realising the consequences of not dealing legally and appropriately with difficult personnel situations. Others wanted to get things in order and function more effectively.

By the end of the first year, six of the original 11 organisations were seeing benefits and remained engaged. A further two ended positively, having gained what they needed and merged with larger organisations. Three never really engaged or benefited significantly and dropped out. A further two joined at the start of year two and both saw positive changes. Overall, therefore, 10 of a total of 13 participating agencies (77%) achieved positive outcomes through Beyond a Helpline.

## Key outcomes for agencies

Agencies changed dramatically in their attitude to HR, their culture and practical ways of working in a number of aspects. By the end of the two years:

- Attitudes to HR functions and to the tasks within the project changed considerably, from some resistance to valuing the support and importance
- All agencies had an HR budget line during the two years but also all signed up with Broadway for another year
- Ways of working were considerably more professional, consistent, and safer. Increased structure had led to problems along the way for some agencies, but ultimately will make life much easier and more productive.
- A shift from an overworked, under-supported Director/ CEO handling all personnel issues to a Director supported with expert advice and with time to think strategically and lead the organisation because personnel matters are delegated appropriately to confident line managers
- Agencies now had the tools and structures to address difficulties with staff and several had already benefited from putting these into practice
- Agencies also had the tools to recruit the right people, train and develop them, and identify and reward high performance
- Several agencies were already finding themselves to be more robust than before, with new partnerships, more money, and people asking their advice.

## Looking to the future

If it is repeated, three key learning points from the completed pilot are:

- Broadway has put 100% into this project – they have fielded excellent staff and the calibre of these has been critical to the success of the project. If the work expands it will be key that any similar provider can maintain that standard of personnel, able to engage with agencies with total confidence and competence.
- Earlier face-to-face contact and more explanation and support may be valuable when the policies are first introduced, to help people understand them and how to make them theirs.
- Commitment and openness to learn are key. The level of commitment required is enormous. Most agencies benefited hugely from this project. Some just valued the helpline and changed very little, as they didn't make time to do the necessary work. It isn't a magic wand.

Recruiting agencies to participate will be a challenge as long as people remain reluctant to invest in the way they organise themselves. Part of the purpose of this project was to show that the investment is worth it, not just to avoid the increasing risk of tribunals or other claims, but much more positively to enable small agencies to be as professional, well run and effective as any larger one. It has succeeded in that. If the sector wants a diverse group of agencies, willing to work with niche groups and specialist needs, ways are needed to enable all agencies to be as effective and professional as possible. Many larger organisations could also benefit from this project.

Beyond a Helpline shows where and how to invest and shows that the results can be quite staggering. It is an appropriate service to continue offering within the homelessness sector and could be extremely valuable in other sectors if replicated. It is hoped that this evaluation report will support such replication.

**For the full report visit [www.lhf.org.uk](http://www.lhf.org.uk)**